



IMPACT OF SECTARIANISM ON POLITICAL STABILITY IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In recent years, sectarianism has become one of the most important factors affecting the stability of Pakistan politically. Besides the impact of violence caused by the division, there are numerous other aspects of the situation, such as problems with governance, institutional performance, political processes, and social dynamics. Although the roots of the conflict lie in theology and the division between Sunni and Shia communities, this issue has grown significantly due to politics, geopolitics, institutional inefficiency, and socio-economic discrepancies. Thus, sectarianism has turned into an important structural factor affecting the state's stability.

This research focuses on assessing how sectarianism impacts political stability in Pakistan. In particular, it looks at the effects this process has on state structure, institutional performance, and governance in general. It employs a qualitative historical-analytical methodology based on the existing literature and information about the current situation in the region during 2020-2024. It draws on theories of political mobilization and institutional performance to interpret the findings.

From the analysis, it became evident that sectarianism threatens the political stability of the state via several channels. It reduces the efficiency of state institutions and weakens the power and capacity of governance. Political instrumentalization of the conflict, inconsistent state responses, and other trends add up to these threats. At the same time, some new aspects, such as the digital mobilization, appear recently.

The results indicate the necessity to adopt a comprehensive approach to the problem. To achieve stable political performance and reduce the likelihood of conflicts, the government needs to introduce security policies and institutional improvements while maintaining consistent approaches.

Keywords: Sectarianism; Political Stability; Pakistan; Identity Politics; Sectarian Violence; Governance; State Authority; Democratic Processes; Institutional Weakness; Political Instrumentalization; Conflict Management; Digital Radicalization; Middle East Comparative Politics; Yemen; Oman; Syria; Saudi Arabia; Geopolitics; Religious Polarization; Preventive Governance

1. Introduction

Political stability may serve as a key precondition for sustainability, efficient governance, and national unity. Indeed, without stability, states fail to maintain their capacity to act effectively and promote growth and prosperity. Yet, in many countries, stability remains an elusive goal and the process of achieving it involves numerous obstacles. Sectarianism appears to be among them in Pakistan.

Firstly, it should be noted that sectarianism in Pakistan is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the scope of simple disagreements related to religious beliefs. Based on fundamental doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia communities, it gradually acquired a complex and multidimensional character, embracing elements of geopolitics and ideology. Eventually, the concept of sectarianism came to imply politicization and institutionalization of identities, in some cases, even militarization of them.



It seems reasonable to assume that this transformation is primarily connected with the geopolitical situation in the Muslim world at the end of the 20th century. On the one hand, the Iranian revolution of 1979 had a substantial effect on Shias throughout the entire Muslim world as it led to emergence of a new model of governance based on religious traditions. On the other hand, the Soviet-Afghan war was another geopolitical process which contributed significantly to development of sectarianism.

As Nasr asserts, this war provided grounds for expansion of militant organizations and ideological mobilization, while in Pakistan itself the government adopted the course of Islamization. All these factors played a considerable role in the process of institutionalization of religious identity and formation of various organizations.

External funding, ideological influence and regional rivalries added to the complexity of sectarianism in Pakistan, contributing to its gradual politicization.

Afterwards, sectarian organizations gained substantial power in many aspects of society and became influential players capable of having their say in politics and affecting governance. At present, sectarian movements continue to develop large networks which are characterized by intersections with various fields including politics.

At times, sectarian organizations managed to establish contacts with political elites, thereby exerting an impact on elections. This fact demonstrates that there is no clear division between religious and political spheres and sectarianism remains an important part of the governance problem in Pakistan.

In modern Pakistan, sectarianism may take different forms: from local violence and attacks on minority groups to online propaganda. Digital communications contribute substantially to propagation of religious identities since they enable rapid transmission of information and formation of ideologically homogenous communities.

Some regions of the country provide illustrative examples of this problem, demonstrating intersections between sectarianism and governance issues, in particular, related to land and resources.

Thus, sectarianism may become a powerful tool for political actors and undermine political stability. For this reason, it needs to be investigated thoroughly in order to understand its nature.

2. Literature Review

The linkages between sectarianism and political stability were discussed in several directions of the literature. Political, institutional, socio-economic, and geopolitical perspectives on the problem contribute to the holistic comprehension of sectarianism's nature and effects.

Vali Nasr (2000) is considered one of the leading researchers in the field. He defines sectarianism as political mobilization, not only the conflict arising due to the divergence in religious dogmas and doctrines. As suggested by Nasr, sectarian identities are created intentionally for the sake of political mobilization and gaining political and social influence on the part of individuals or groups of people.

Hassan Abbas (2010) continues Nasr's line of reasoning but focuses his attention on the role of the state in the development of sectarianism in Pakistan. As he suggests, the state inconsistently applies itself toward different religious groups. Some groups, which could be used for strategic purposes, are promoted or supported by the state. The tolerance toward these groups' actions and activities undermines the state's integrity and weakens its control over all other sects.

Other approaches to the matter include institutional perspectives, which emphasize the importance of political and legal institutions' development for political stability in the region. For instance, according to Ayesha Siddiqa (2007), an unbalanced interrelation between the civil sector and the military institution in Pakistan creates a situation in which the security approach

predominates and governs the entire process of governing. Thus, there is no place for reforming governance mechanisms.

Current research on sectarianism also includes the analysis of socio-economic and geopolitical factors influencing the dynamics of sectarian relations. As noted by Butt and Wattoo (2025), the rise of sectarianism in the country is stimulated by such socio-economic issues as income inequality, governance failure, and political exclusion of specific communities and sects.

Ahmad and Hani (2025) emphasize the role of geopolitical factors as another source of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. In particular, as argued by these authors, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran leads to increasing external financial and ideological support for Pakistani sectarian organizations, contributing to exacerbating existing conflicts.

Digital media and information technology represent another sphere of influence on sectarian movements and the process of their mobilization. Akram (2025) claims that social networks are becoming powerful tools for mobilizing people around ideas that contribute to the growth of tensions.

However, existing literature pays little attention to the influence of sectarianism on the political stability of the country through institutional mechanisms. Although the scholars tend to focus on the influence of sectarianism on violence and ideology, relatively few discuss governance problems.

Therefore, current research is designed to analyze sectarianism through its impacts on political stability via institutional aspects.

3. Methodology

In this research paper, the methodology adopted for studying the influence of sectarianism on the political stability of Pakistan is qualitative and historical analysis. This is mainly because of the fact that sectarianism itself is multifaceted in nature, which means that a qualitative study design will prove more effective in capturing its essence.

3.1 Research Design

The study follows an interpretive analytical approach combining historical, institutional, and political perspectives. The methodology adopted ensures that the investigation delves deeper than superficial analysis and explores the systemic linkages between sectarianism and political instability.

3.2 Sources of Data

The research uses various secondary sources to maintain its scientific approach and objectivity:

- Literature: Classic and recent works that explore the topic of sectarianism, political stability, and governance
- Policy analysis: Government publications, policy frameworks (National Action Plan), and other institutional studies
- International publications: Reports by institutions that analyze the dynamics of conflicts and governance
- Case evidence: Events that occurred between 2020 and 2024, especially in regions prone to conflict

Incorporating different sources into the research provides an opportunity for triangulation.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis will be conducted through three interrelated dimensions, which include:

- Historical Analysis: Analyzes the development of sectarianism from theology-based divisions to its use as a tool for political purposes.
- Institutional Analysis: Focuses on the impact of sectarianism on governance capacity and performance.

- **Political Analysis:** Highlights the consequences of sectarianism on the process of democratization and politics.

In this way, it becomes possible to relate micro and macro events to one another.

3.4 Limitations of Methodology

Although the qualitative research method offers in-depth knowledge, there are also constraints associated with it. For example, using secondary sources could limit the researcher from accessing local and current insights. Furthermore, lack of primary data from the field would make it impossible to interact directly with those involved. Nevertheless, these constraints are minimized by using credible sources.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Impact of Sectarianism on Political Stability: Decline of State Authority

The role of state authority in upholding political stability can hardly be overestimated. Being an essential part of the state authority, legitimacy is strongly associated with the ability to guarantee security, justice and equal treatment of all individuals. Violations of these principles during sectarian violence lead to a crisis of the state's legitimacy.

As sectarian violence becomes a constant phenomenon in certain areas, the state becomes vulnerable to losing the monopoly on violence. In cases of repeated violations of citizens' rights and absence of effective protection against such acts, minority communities experience a feeling of exclusion due to their status.

An example of how this pattern unfolds is demonstrated by the Hazara community of Quetta that experiences recurring attacks despite all possible protective measures.

As a result, there comes into existence a vicious circle, since weakened state authority is accompanied by growing influence of non-state actors, thus resulting in an increased level of violence and eroding trust in political institutions.

Social fragmentation becomes another serious problem since marginalization of specific social groups negatively impacts national unity.

4.2 Instrumentalization of Sectarianism for Political Gains

Sectarianism in Pakistan is a means that is exploited for political gains. It serves as a tool through which political parties mobilize their voters, especially during elections. In such a scenario, sectarianism ceases to be a social problem and becomes an instrument for political gains.

Political discourse using sectarianism can increase polarization among communities, legitimizing the exclusionary narrative. If political gain depends on sectarian mobilization, then there will be a strong incentive to maintain these polarizations. Such an approach is detrimental to democracy and reinforces sectarianism within the political structure.

In some instances, the political community in Pakistan has developed an alliance with sectarian organizations. As a result, sectarianism has become intertwined with politics. The implications of such an event have made governance difficult because sectarianism could influence policy decisions, overriding national interests.

Another negative implication of instrumentalization of sectarianism is that it reduces accountability. Political organizations that depend on sectarianism for political gain have a tendency to disregard other governance issues.

4.3 Effects on Democratic Processes

One of the major impacts of sectarianism on the process of democracy is its impact on participation in politics. Due to security reasons, political participation becomes low especially in areas prone to conflicts.

Additionally, sectarianism has an effect on how political processes unfold. It is usually the focus of political debates rather than policy issues during elections. This makes democracy less effective.

Directly, sectarian violence has effects on the electoral process. The activities of the election period can be compromised due to fear. In such a case, democracy suffers.

Security is another aspect impacted by sectarianism in terms of the process of democracy. Due to security threats brought about by sectarian violence, governments are likely to take actions which may compromise civil rights in the long run.

4.4 Expanding the Case Studies: Quetta, Kurram, and Karachi

Quetta (Hazara Community)

As was stated above, sectarian violence continues being a serious issue in Pakistan. For example, the Hazara community suffers from numerous attacks on it. Such actions cause not only deaths but also forced displacements and psychological distress.

It should be stressed that marginalization causes a number of negative consequences. Namely, minorities lose their ability to participate in politics, get economic advantages and integrate into the society.

Kurram District

There is also another example of the presence of sectarianism, namely Kurram district. In addition to purely sectarian factors, there may be problems with local tribes, lands, and access to natural resources. All these factors lead to a cyclical nature of violence in the region.

At the same time, the government mainly tends to impose cease-fires on such conflicts. It seems that such approaches cannot provide effective results until fundamental problems are addressed.

Karachi (Urban Complexity)

It has already been mentioned that Karachi is one of the most complicated cities in the country. There is an intersection of various forms of violence, such as ethnic and political ones, and sectarianism is no exception.

4.5 Emerging Trends in Sectarianism

These recent changes have shown us that rather than reducing, sectarianism in Pakistan is undergoing an evolution. Here are some trends we can identify:

1. Regionalized Conflicts

With time, sectarian conflicts have become localized rather than widespread. The reasons for this phenomenon include the connection between sectarian identity and local conflicts.

2. Online Media

The digital age has brought about the use of online media for communicating and spreading the sectarian message. With social networking sites, communication has never been faster.

3. Geostrategic Interests

There still remain regional interests that impact the dynamics of the conflicts. Ideological assistance, sometimes even monetary, has been offered by external agencies in order to impact local conflicts.

4. Loose Networks

Rather than having tight networks, sectarian organizations have become decentralized. This has made them difficult to detect and control.

5. Increased Polarization

There is increasing polarization in society.

4.6 Institutional Implications of Sectarianism

Sectarianism is a burden on the government structure. There is an urgent need for security services to divert their attention to addressing violent incidents, and in doing so, it becomes difficult for them to attend to other pressing matters.

There are certain complications involved in making use of administrative institutions. For example, there is a lack of cooperation between the federal and provincial administrations, resulting in poor policy formulation.

Moreover, there are issues in terms of policy-making due to the influence of sectarianism. Policymakers have to take into account the possible repercussions of their decisions based on sects.

5. Comparative Analysis: Sectarianism in Pakistan, Yemen, Oman, Syria, and Saudi Arabia

The necessity of a comparative approach lies in the understanding that the issue of sectarianism must be examined against the backdrop of regional politics. Although the nature of sectarianism varies from one country to another, the study of examples like those of Yemen, Oman, Syria, and Saudi Arabia can help us gain some understanding of sectarian politics.

5.1 Pakistan: Informal and Politically Instrumentalized Sectarianism

In Pakistan, sectarianism functions without becoming institutionalized through political governance systems. While the Pakistani state constitutionally prohibits any form of sectarian discrimination, sectarianism continues to play an instrumental role in political strategy and violence. As such, Pakistan represents a case in which sectarianism is neither institutionalized nor completely divorced from the workings of governance.

The Pakistani case shows:

- Non-institutionalized sectarian involvement in politics
- Rigorous state response to sectarian threats
- Limited institutional capability for political governance

As such, sectarianism remains a constant presence without being institutionally entrenched in the political system.

5.2 Yemen: Sectarianism amid State Collapse and Civil War

In Yemen, sectarianism has come to be a factor that drives the ongoing civil wars and state collapse. Unlike in Pakistan, where the government maintains control over most of the territories, Yemen has witnessed a complete breakdown of state authority. The politicization of sectarian identity among the Sunni and Zaydi Shia populations has contributed significantly to the conflict.

The Houthi-led uprising provides an example of how sectarianism can be used as a tool in conflict among rival groups and external powers, especially regional countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this way, local conflicts have turned into proxy wars among other regional players.

Unlike Pakistan, Yemen shows the potential for sectarianism to escalate once state institutions lose their legitimacy. Without any political control in the region, sectarianism becomes the main driving force that causes massive destruction.

5.3 Oman: Effective Management of Sectarian Identity

In Oman, sectarianism has been successfully managed through effective governance policies and mechanisms. In addition to Ibadī Muslims, Oman has minorities of Sunni and Shia Muslims. However, there is no sectarian conflict in Oman, and the country remains politically stable.

Some of the contributing factors include:

- Effective central state governance

- Effective political messaging
- Limited politicization of sectarian identity

Unlike in Pakistan, where sectarianism is often used as a political tool, Oman shows how effective governance and inclusive state management strategies can bring stability to the country.

5.4 Syria: Sectarianism in Authoritarian Governance and Civil War

In Syria, sectarianism has played a crucial role in authoritarian governance and civil wars. In this conflict, the identity of the ruling Alawite minority against Sunni majority plays a critical role.

Following the civil war, the sectarian identity has taken on a new dimension in Syria. Various factions have formed based on their sectarian backgrounds. Furthermore, external forces have supported the different factions in the civil war. Unlike in Pakistan, the sectarian violence in Syria is nation-wide, causing mass casualties.

In contrast to Pakistan, Syria shows how sectarianism has become the determining factor in a conflict when effective governance and political reforms fail to address the issue.

5.5 Saudi Arabia: State-controlled Sectarian Identity

In Saudi Arabia, sectarianism is effectively regulated under the authoritarian regime. The state has full control over religious institutions and discourse, ensuring that sectarianism cannot be openly expressed in public spheres.

Nevertheless, sectarian differences, especially between Sunni and Shia communities, still exist in Saudi Arabia. The state takes measures to regulate and limit sectarianism rather than engaging in a political discussion.

Unlike in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia:

- Controls the expression of sectarianism
- Hinders political mobilization along sectarian lines
- Uses coercive means to enforce sectarian regulations

Although the approach has succeeded in reducing sectarian violence in Saudi Arabia, it may hinder the future political development of the country.

5.6 Conclusion

Overall, there are several similarities across the cases:

- Strong state capacity leads to effective management of sectarianism
- Weak institutions increase the likelihood of sectarian escalation into civil war
- Political mobilization based on sectarianism contributes to instability
- Governmental approach determines the outcome

Pakistan lies somewhere in the middle. It possesses more institutional capacity compared to Yemen and Syria. However, its governance capacity is inferior to those of Oman and Saudi Arabia.

6. Policy Assessment and Recommendation

An important evaluation of Pakistan's policy approach against sectarianism shows that it is not the lack of policy framework but the lack of consistent and effective implementation of the same.

6.1 Weaknesses in Existing Policies

Frameworks like National Action Plan (NAP) have been developed with comprehensive guidelines for fighting extremist activities and sects. The problems arise out of the inconsistent application and weaknesses which are:

- No cooperation between national and provincial governments
- Slacking in enforcing regulations concerning religious institutions

- Neglecting ideological and educational aspects
- Dependent only on security aspects

This has hampered the efficacy of any policy response to sectarianism and allowed it to survive.

6.2 Preventative Governance Strategy

To ensure political stability and sustainability in the long-run, Pakistan should stop relying on security responses to sect-related issues and opt for preventative strategies. It means finding the root cause of such conflicts instead of focusing on the surface.

Major recommendations include:

- Education: Encouraging tolerance and critical thinking
- Economic Development: Alleviation of poverty and marginalization
- Political Representation: Including minorities into governance processes

6.3 Institutional Reform

Any kind of sectarian policy will depend heavily on institutional reforms which should include:

- Bureaucratic improvements and efficiency\
- Coordination between different government bodies
- Rule of law and accountability

The weak nature of institutions has been preventing any effective policy from taking effect.

6.4 Regulation of the Digital Space

As mentioned earlier, the Internet has been one of the biggest channels of spreading sect-related ideas and ideologies. To stop this, policy should address:

- Supervision and regulation of online hate speech
- Creating counter-narratives
- Putting technology platforms on notice

6.5 Localization of Conflict Management Efforts

Since violence related to sectarian beliefs has become more and more local, policies will need to be adjusted to accommodate this trend by:

- Introducing community-based dispute resolution programs
- Leveraging local governments
- Conducting targeted economic development initiatives

7. Conclusion

To this end, sectarianism can be considered as one of the biggest hindrances to political stability in Pakistan, being both socially, politically, and institutionally entrenched in ways which undermine state control, undermine democracy, and divide societies.

It becomes apparent through the findings of the study that sectarianism is not something that is generated due to differences of religion alone, but is also something that exists because of structural problems that include poor governance and other socio-economic disparities.

Comparing the case of Pakistan to others, it is clear that neither is Pakistan suffering from the worst of the problem, nor is the situation under complete control in the country, as can be seen through comparison with other nations like Yemen and Syria, and Oman and Saudi Arabia.

One thing which becomes very apparent is that Pakistan must address the lack of integration between formulation and implementation of policies aimed at combating sectarianism.

Political stability can only be achieved by combining security strategies with institutional improvements.



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